DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 003 CS 502 673

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TITLE Constructing a Theory of Intercultural Communication: The Promise and Paradox.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Summer Conference on Intercultural Communication (Honolulu, HI, August 2-4, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Culture Contact; *Information Theory; Needs Assessment; *Research Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Research; *Intercultural Communication

ABSTRACT

Because of the varied interests of the people involved in intercultural communication, there is little agreement over the definition of that concept. For this reason, no theories of intercultural communication exist; rather, the focus of recent writings in the field has been on a number of "sensitizing concepts" that provide a framework for beginning to understand communication between people from different cultures. The major problem with the utilization of such concepts is that they are often discussed in isolation and are seldom related directly to the process of communication. If the study of intercultural communication is to develop further, scholars in the field need to begin constructing theories. They must begin to adapt/modify current theorizing in the field of communication to take into consideration the major cultural variables that may intervene and influence the communication process. In addition, they must persuade communication scholars that all communication processes are similarly influenced by "cultural" variables. Thus the major promise of theorizing in intercultural communication lies in bringing about a convergence in the discipline on the importance of the cultural identity of communicators in understanding the communication process. Only by successfully accomplishing this task will the study of human communication be moved developmentally toward a "mature science." (FL)

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CONSTRUCTING A THEORY OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION:

THE PROMISE AND PARADOX

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CONSTRUCTING A THEORY OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: THE PROMISE AND PARADOX

"A good theory is one that holds together long enough to get you to a better one." Anonymous

In recent years, there has been a great increase in the number of publications under the general rubric of intercultural communication. The people concerned with this relatively "new" area of study comprise both academicians and practitioners. Academic disciplines such as communication, sociology, linguistics, cultural anthropology, and the social psychological studies on "intergroup contact" and "adjustment" have all impacted on defining the boundaries of the field. In addition, practitioners from such areas as foreign student advising, cross-cultural counseling, English as a second language, and cross-cultural training have influenced the directions of study for intercultural communication.

Given the varied interests of the people involved in intercultural communication, it is not surprising, therefore, that there is little agreement over the meaning and focus of the concept "intercultural communication." The problems in defining intercultural communication are similar to those involved in defining "communication" in general (see Miller, 1966; Dance, 1970; Gross, 1975; and Scott, 1977). Currently, there is little agreement on a definition of what constitutes "intercultural communication." For example, Maretzki views intercultural communication as "an exchange of meaning between cultures" (1965, p. 478). Other definitions include: "communication between groups with different value structures" (Jain, Prosser and Miller, 1974, p. 33); "intercultural communication can best be understood as a cultural variance in the

the perception of social objects and events" (Porter and Samover, 1976, p. 4); "interaction between members of differing cultures" (Sitaram and Cogdell, 1976, p. 18); and "culture is communication" (Hall, 1959). Saral (1977) has summarized the problem very well when he says: "the newness of the field has attracted scholars from varying disciplines, who, while enriching and broadening the area, have also rendered the field so diverse and discursive that it defies definition" (p. 389).

As would be expected, given the lack of accepted definition for the field, no "theories" of intercultural communication exist. Rather, the focus of recent writings in the field has been on a number of "sensitizing concepts" that provide a framework for beginning to understand communication between people from different cultures. Sensitizing concepts, as characterized by Williams, "convey a sense of reference and orientation grasped through personal experience" (1973, p. 243). The major problem with the utilization of such concepts (for example, "value orientations," "assumptions," "sets of expectations," and "patterns of thinking," to name a few) is that they are often discussed in isolation and never directly related to the process of communication.

It is our contention that if the study of intercultural communication is to develop further, it needs to move from a discussion of sensitizing concepts toward a consistent theoretical framework for the analysis of communication between people from different cultures. Or, in other words, scholars in the field need to begin constructing theories of intercultural communication. It should be noted at the outset that this position is in contrast to two recent publications in the field (Stewart, 1978; and Asante, Newmark and Blake, 1979). Specifically, Stewart argues that "It is premature and may be irrelevant for inter-

cultural communication to construct formal theories, test hypotheses and verify postulates following the traditional canons of the sciences. Crystallization of terms now would probably dampen development" (1978, p. 265). Similarly, Asante, Newmark and Blake contend, "What is needed at this juncture is more description of the intercultural communication process, i.e., our scientists need to observe before they theorize" (1979, p. 12). We would argue, however, that to purposefully ignore theorizing will hinder the development of the field. Prior to addressing the "promise" and "paradox" of constructing theories in intercultural communication it is necessary to briefly examine why theory is necessary.

Why Theorize?

The question posed as the heading for this section (Why Theorize?) has plagued philosophers of science (and social science) for generations. Traditionally, one or more of three possible answers are given to this question: (1) to explain, (2) to predict, or (3) to control. It should be noted that the explanation-prediction-control view of theory is directly attributable to a positivistic approach to theory development (which many scholars in our field, e.g., Casmir, 1978, have argued is inapplicable to the phenomena we are studying).

Although there is much we can learn from the positivistic tradition, it is not necessary for us to buy it "lock, stock and barrel." For example, one of the most widely utilized texts on theory construction ignores the control aspect of theory:

> Theories of social and human behavior address themselves to two distinct goals of science: (1) prediction and (2) understanding. It will be argued that these two separate goals and that the structure of theories employed to achieve each is unique. I will not, however, conclude that they are either inconsistent or incompatible. In the usual case of building

> in behavioral sciences, understanding and prediction are not often achieved together, and it therefore becomes important to ask why. It will be concluded that each goal may be attained without reference to the other (Dubin, 1969, pp. 9-10).

Dubin goes on to point out that prediction is concerned with outcomes, while understanding is concerned with interaction among variables (the units of a theory). The crux of the matter is that we have a choice as to which function(s) we want our theories to perform with respect to explanation-prediction-control.

It is our contention that theorizing is necessary in intercultural communication if we are to understand the process of communication between people from different cultures. This is consistent with Karl Popper when he points out that, "Theories are nets cast to catch what we call 'the world': to rationalize, to explain, to master it. We endeavour to make the mesh ever finer and finer" (1968). It will be noted that the initial goal specified for a theory of intercultural communication is understanding rather than prediction or control. Questions of prediction and control may be more fruitfully addressed at a later stage of development of theory in our field.

Those of us currently engaged in studying intercultural communication all have an implicit "theory" in our heads. That is, we all have an inclination of what the important variables in the process are and how they should be interrelated. What more is a theory aimed at understanding than a set of logically interrelated propositions? Propositions, as we are using the term, suggests statements which relate variables to each other. The logically interrelated aspect of our definition of a theory does not imply any specific form of logic. The logic utilized could be one of the major western logics (e.g., deduction, induction, or retroduction) or one derived from some other culture. The important

point is that the propositions are somehow interrelated.

Assuming, then, that we theorize about the intercultural communication process, how do we evaluate the theories that are developed? Fisher (1979) in discussing the current state of theory in communication sheds some light on this question. He argues: "The ultimate value of a theory lies in what is accomplished using its guidelines in conducting scholarly inquiry. Whether it was generated by a sophisticated research program or even armchair speculation seems trivial in the long run" (Fisher, 1979, p. 17). Fisher goes on to suggest: "The key to choosing one theory over another, then, is never which is more 'true' or 'correct' but which one is more useful or interesting. After all, the theory is not not(h)ing more nor less than the creation of a useful explanation in order to understand the world around us. It succeeds or fails solely on the basis of whether it is 'elected' by the scientific community" (1979, p. 21).

The State of Theorizing in Communication[1]

In recent years interest in theory-building has been on the upswing in the field of communication. Although this development may not have been "caused" by, it was at least influenced by, the introduction of the rule-governed perspective by Cushman and Whiting (1972). One of the first indications of this trend is McDermott's (1975) discussion of the classical approaches to theory construction. Further theoretical introspection has taken place recently in two regional journals: (1) Western Journal of Speech Communication devoted its entire 1977 and 1978 Winter issues to theoretical aspects of communication, and (2) Communication Quarterly devoted its Winter 1977 issue to theoretical concerns in communication. In addition, Human Communication Research published two state-of-the-art essays on interpersonal communication in the Winter 1978 volume. Finally,

recent overviews of theory and research in the various sub-areas of the field have appeared in the Communication Yearbook series published by the International Communication Association.

Utilizing Kuhn's (1970) terminology, the field of communication can be classified as being in the "preparadigmatic" stage of development. This implies that there are several conflicting paradigms which exist and are "battling" for supremacy within the discipline. Four of the "major" paradigms utilized in the study of human communication are the covering laws, systems, rules, and constructivist approaches.

The covering laws model is a theoretical perspective borrowed from the physical sciences (i.e., the empiricist or positivist approach). Although this approach has been widely criticized for its lack of applicability to the study of communication (for example, see O'Keefe, 1975), it has recently received a partial defense by Berger (1977). However, given Wolfgang Stegmüeller's (1976) recent work, The Structure and Dynamics of Theories, which has grounded the postivist position, the covering laws perspective can not be dismissed entirely. Indeed, many communication scholars still maintain positivistic assumptions about the nature of theory (i.e., theory involves explanation, prediction and control).

The systems perspective is gaining a large number of advocates as an approach to developing communication theory (for example, see Monge, 1973, and Ruben and Kim, 1975). Even though general system "possesses no conceptual content directly applicable to communication. The content of a systemic view of communication ranges from Monge's (1977) structural functionalism to Fisher's (1975) behavioral sequence and numerous varieties in between" (Fisher, 1979, p. 15).

The final two major paradigms utilized in communication stem from phenomenology. Rules theory was developed from the writings of Cushman and Whiting (1972) in the field of communication. Like laws and systems, rules provide a structure for theory, but no content. Rules theory has been most fully developed by Pearce (1976), Cushman and Pearce (1977), and Cushman (1977). The second phenomenologically based approach is constructivism (see Delia, 1977a and 1977b) which focuses on internalized personal constructs (Kelly, 1955).

Each of these four perspectives has a few major proponents and many "disciples." However, at the present time none of the perspectives can be considered predominate. As a matter of fact, Fisher has argued that this has led to a situation where too many perspectives may be available in the field.

> None of these present attempts to develop communication theory have any semblance of broadly based support within the scientific community in order to claim a consensus. In fact, within each school of thought exists extreme disagreement among the disciples of the new theory: That disagreement extends to the methods for conducting research, concepts used to load the theory, and the generation of significant research questions to be studied with that framework...The situation is this communication does not suffer from a lack of theories. Rather, communication may be suffering from too many theories (Fisher, 1979, pp. 10-11).

While this is true, it could be argued that the state of theorizing in communication, given its current stage of development as a "science," is "healthy." Nevertheless, if the field is to move into the developmental stage which Kuhn (1970) refers to as a "mature science" one of the major paradigms will eventually have to dominate. Given this brief overview of theorizing in the overall field of communication, we will turn our attention to the state of theory in intercultural communication.

The State of Theorizing in Intercultural Communication

Within the recent explosion of books in intercultural communication (e.g., Condon and Yosef, 1975; Fisher and Merrill, 1976; Hall, 1976; Ruhly, 1976; Samovar and Porter, 1976; Sitaram and Cogdell, 1976; Hoopes, Pedersen, and Renwick, 1977; Keller, 1977; Dodd, 1977; Casmir, 1978; Prosser, 1978; Weaver, 1978; Asante, et al., 1979; Sarbaugh, 1979; and Smith and Luce, 1979) there is relatively little discussion of theory or theorizing. Notwithstanding, there have been a few calls for theory in intercultural communication in recent convention papers (see Gudykunst, 1977; Wheeler, 1977; Gudykunst and Wright, 1978).

Utilizing Kuhn's (1970) perspective, the field of intercultural communication can be considered "aparadigmatic." Aparadigmatic implies an area which is somewhat "immature" and has not gone through the development of its first paradigm. This is to be expected given the ambivalence by scholars in the field as to whether or not it is even desirable (or possible) to develop a theory (or theories) of intercultural communication (see, for example, Stewart, 1978, and Asante, et al., 1979 discussed earlier). Nevertheless, there have been two theoretical developments in the field worthy of note. First, several authors have examined the application of more general approaches to the study of communication (e.g., rules, network analysis, etc.) to intercultural communication. Second, a few scholars have made beginning attempts at theorizing in specific areas within the field (e.g., sojourner adjustment and acculturation).

Specific attempts to apply the perspectives from the general study of communication to the intercultural field are sparse (they number only around five). One of the first such attempts appears to be Gudykunst (1977) which examined the application of Miller and Steinberg's (1975)

developmental approach to communication. Other more recent attempts include: (1) Davey's (1978) discussion of cultural patterns and interaction sets; (2) Wiseman's (1978) discussion of the application of a rules perspective to the study of intercultural communication: (3) Wright's (1978) examination of social network analysis and its utility in intercultural communication; (4) Dodd's (1978) discussion of some interpersonal communication parameters in the intercultural context; and (5) Tyler's (1978) use of a "languetics" model to develop intercultural communicative indicators.[2]

In addition to the above attempts to examine the application of general communication "theory" to intercultural communication there are a few beginnings at theorizing in the field. For example, Fitchen (1978) has briefly discussed a transactional analysis of intercultural communication, while Howell (1979) proposes a very general interactive theory of communication which he applies to people from different cultures. Further, Gudykunst, Wiseman and Hammer (1977) have developed a path analytic model of sojourner adjustment. In addition, Kim (1977, 1978 and 1979) has presented an interactive communication theory of acculturation.[3]

On the whole theorizing in intercultural communication is in the very early stages of development. We believe this is due, at least in part, to scholars in the field tuning in more to the paradoxes of theory, rather than its promise.

The Promise and Paradox of Theory in Intercultural Communication

The major paradoxes involved in theorizing in intercultural communication involve two separate, but highly interrelated terms: culture, and intercultural communication (ignoring the definitional problems of the term communication). The definitional problem with respect to the

term intercultural communication has been addressed earlier. It should be noted, however, that definitional problems can not be dismissed lightly. How we define the field will not only influence our research questions and theory development, it will influence what we see. Prior to examining this problem in more detail, we will briefly turn our attention to the paradox of culture.

According to Hall, "the paradox of culture is that language, the system most frequently used to describe culture, is by nature poorly adapted to this difficult task. It is too linear, not comprehensive enough, too slow, too limited, too constrained, too unnatural, too much of a product of its own evolution, and too artificial" (1976, p. 49). In other words, Hall appears to be arguing that we can never fully understand culture, and by extension its impact on communication, because we must use language.

A closely related argument is presented by Martin (1976) in his discussion of the contradictions of cross-cultural communication. He argues:

> Not only is all communication - regardless of who the communicants are - of necessity less than 100 per cent effective, but communication must also be thought of as existing between individuals who are less than 100 per cent culturally homogeneous...To the extent that cultural traits have diverged or remained divergent, communication is corespondingly less effective since cultural characteristics are disparate. This is another way of saying there is no such thing as cross-cultural communication, although there may be relatively effective communication between people and peoples, most of whose cultural characteristics may seem hopelessly different (Martin, 1976, p. 432).

Thus, this writer appears to define cross-cultural communication in terms of effectiveness (e.g., it is only cross-cultural communication if symbols are accurately transmitted across cultural boundaries). Martin's

argument appears to confuse two separate, but related issues. Namely, the issue of whether or not communicants come from culturally divergent backgrounds is related to the potential effectiveness of the communication, but it is not synonomous with it as Martin suggests. This position (e.g., that the term "cross-cultural communication" implies effectiveness) often clouds our thinking in that it confuses descriptive and evaluative characteristics. In order to keep our discussions conceptually clear we must differentiate between what intercultural communication is and whether or not it has been effective. Martin's conclusion -- there is no such thing as cross-cultural communication -- is similar to the one reached by Ellingsworth (1977).

Ellingsworth's discussion centers around what he contends is a widely-asserted proposition in the field: "Intercultural communication is a unique dimension of communication which requires special labeling, attention, methodology, and instruction" (1977, p. 100, italics in original). In examining the implications of this assertion (in an attempt to disprove it), Ellingsworth argues that "intercultural communication is probably an imprecise, nonoperational label for all but the most contrived cases of human interaction. For all the rest, some cultural variability between participants will be present, but its amount is not a reliable predictor of the ease of communication" (1977, p. 101). In extending his argument, he points out there are two ways of rephrasing the above proposition and that:

> Both directly refute the assertion of intercultural communication as a unique phenomenon. One is 'All communication is intercultural.' The other is 'No communication is intercultural.' These are alternate forms of the same statement. Both point to the same conclusion -- that cultural variability is a universal element of the communication exper-

> ience. Except as a public relations strategy, the term intercultural communication should be used sparingly by scholars, and then most properly as a post hoc description of encounters where cultural differences become manifest, were recognized, and were successfully compensated for. As an a priori prediction of what will be the dominant aspect of an encounter, it must be advanced very tentatively, if at all (1977, pp. 101-102, italics in original).

In the latter part of the above quote it appears that Ellingsworth, like Martin, would use the term intercultural (or cross-cultural for Martin) communication when communication between people from different cultures was easy or effective. Although adding an effectiveness aspect to qualify as intercultural clouds the issue, it is not the principal point with which we disagree.

To us it appears fallacious reasoning to suggest that either "all" or "no" communication is intercultural is an acceptable restatement of the proposition that intercultural is a unique aspect of communication. Further, we believe that most scholars in the field would contend that intracultural and intercultural processes are similar, rather than intercultural being a unique phenomona as Ellingsworth asserts. For example, one of the most recent texts in the field takes the following pattern:

> There appears to be a temptation among scholars and practitioners of communication to approach intercultural communication as though it were a different process than intracultural communication. As one begins to identify the variables that operate in the communication being studied, however, it becomes apparent that they are the same for both intercultural and intracultural settings (Sarbaugh, 1979, p. 5).

Sarbaugh goes on to suggest that since all communication is intercultural to a certain degree we can use the heterogeneity and homogeneity of the participants to discern the degree of interculturalness.

If intra- and intercultural processes are seen as similar, then the two rephrasings which Ellingsworth suggests make sense. In other words,

only if the processes are viewed as basically the same can we say that either "all communication is intercultural" or "no communication is intercultural." The question which must be addressed is: accepting which of the statements will yield the greatest promise for the field.

Ellingsworth suggests that we accept the proposition that "no communication is intercultural." However, given that we are academicians who specialize in intercultural communication, obviously we opt for "all communication is intercultural." Our position as consistent with Smith's earlier statement: "My first idea is that all communication is intercultural. Not just some communication. At the very least, all communication is between subcultures" (in Larson and Dance, 1970, p. 166). Similarly, Lee Thayer took the position that "all communication is intercultural" in his opening remarks at the Division V "Top 3" paper presentations at the 1979 International Communication Association convention in Philadelphia, PA.[4]

It is our contention that to relegate the use of the term "intercultural" to only post hoc explanations where cultural differences were successfully compensated for" as Ellingsworth would suggest, is an unapprised reasoning to use. This strategy would lead to exactly the opposite result which Ellingsworth desires -- "the generation of middle-range theories with the power to predict process and outcomes where cultural variability is found" (1977, p. 105). If we are to demonstrate that intra- and intercultural communication processes are <u>basically</u> the same, we must replicate previous communication research taking into consideration important cultural variables.

If we accept that <u>inter-</u> and <u>intra</u>cultural processes are similar and that to a certain extent all communication is intercultural, then

our task becomes to adapt/modify current theorizing in the field of communication to take into consideration the major cultural variables which may intervene and influence the communication process. In addition, a secondary task becomes the encouragement of colleagues in other areas of communication to examine the influence of sociocultural variables as a potential source of variance in the communication process. In other words, we must persuade communication scholars that all communication processes are similarly influenced by "cultural" variables. Thus, the major promise of theorizing in intercultural communication will ultimately lie in bringing about a convergence in the discipline on the importance of the cultural identity of communicators in understanding the communication process.[5] Only by successfully accomplishing this task will we be able to move the study of human communication forward developmentally toward what Kuhn calls a "mature science." A secondary benefit of theorizing will lie in the applied aspects of intercultural (e.g., cross-cultural training). As Kurt Lewin is often quoted as saying: "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."

Notes

1 Much of this section is drawn from Fisher (1979).

2 Four of these five papers (Davey, Wright, Wiseman and Dodd) were presented in a session at the 1978 Speech Communication Association convention titled, "Open Forum on Intercultural Communication Models."

3 We have not included some works, which given a different conceptualization of what a theory is would be included (e.g., Hall, 1959 and 1976). These works are obviously useful in a theorizing attempt in our field.

[4] We believe the view that all communication is, in some ways, intercultural is defensible and widely held by people in our field. In fact, it even appears to be recognized by general communication scholars (for example, see Miller and Steinberg's, 1975, discussion of the cultural level of data).

[5] In all fairness to Ellingsworth (1977), our conclusion is essentially the same as his. He argues for the convergence of intra and intercultural communication study. Where we disagree is on the utility of the term intercultural as a modifier for communication.

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